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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the degree of marital adjustment and the emotional adjustment of the children within the family is widely accepted as is the corollary belief that the marital relationship determines the child's adjustment. A sample of 69 married couples with children was used to examine the interrelationships among several measures of family adjustment and to explore the role of the social desirability response set on the self-report of marital and child adjustment. Subjects completed the Spouse Observation Checklist, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the Louisville Behavior Checklist, the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory, the Parental Attitude Research Instrument, and the Edwards Social Desirability Scale. Results closely replicated previous findings, suggesting that couples with well-adjusted marriages were unlikely to have children who evidenced behavior problems. When social desirability was controlled, the relationship between marital and child adjustment was not significant. The results suggest that previously reported correlations between marital and child adjustment may have been inflated by a social desirability response set. The social desirability response set appears to play an important role in the relationship between marital and child adjustment among normal families. (Author/NRB)

Family Adjustment, Parental Attitudes, and Social Desirability

by

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A relationship between the degree of marital adjustment and the emotional adjustment of the children within the family is widely accepted by clinicians and theoreticians as is the corollary belief that the marital relationship determines the child's adjustment (Rutter, 1971). A particularly interesting example of the theoretical use of marital distress as a determinant of childhood behavior disorders, is the reinterpretation of the horse phobia exhibited by "Little Hans" as an expression of marital conflict (Strean, 1967). This case exemplifies a concern among psychologists that the successful treatment of a child's symptoms may result in the emergence of distress in another family member, and stems from the theoretical notion that a child's deviant behavior is a manifestation of a more basic underlying family disturbance (Schwartz & Johnson, 1981).

An aspect of a family disturbance that has been studied extensively is marital conflict. The notion that marital disruption is associated with child deviance is supported by a large body of empirical literature which reports a high incidence of divorce and marital conflict among the families of delinquent children (e.g. Bennett, 1960; McCord, McCord, & Gudeman, 1960). Typical of such data are the findings of Glueck and Glueck (1950) who report that 36.8% of parents of delinquent children and 65.3% of parents of nondelinquent children have a "good" conjugal relationship. This finding has been so frequently replicated that it seems safe to conclude that families with delinquent children are charcterized by marital dissatisfaction and conflict. However, these data do not establish marital conflict as a cause of delinquency nor do they clarify the relationship between marital discord and other types of childhood disturbances.

If parental conflict and marital disruption is a pervasive determinant of childhood psychopathology, and not just a characteristic of families with a delinquent child, then a relationship between marital and child adjustment should be found among other populations. A significant negative correlation between marital adjustment and child deviance is reported for fathers (but not mothers) of children referred for treatment of active behavior problems (Johnson & Lobitz, 1974) and normal families also evidence a significant association between marital and child adjustment (Ferguson & Allen, 1978). These studies, that rely in part or entirely on self-report measures, find a relationship between marital and child adjustment but results of observational studies are equivocal. In a review of the family interaction literature, (1975) Jacob concludes that the observational data are too inconsistent across studies to warrant a conclusion regarding the role of interparent conflict in families with a disturbed child. Method of measurement may be an important factor in the relationship between marital adjustment and child adjustment but, incomplete knowledge of the interrelationships among various measures of family adjustment impedes interpretation of the findings (Jacob, 1975). As a result, we do not yet know if marital adjustment is associated with child adjustment in the general population.

One potentially important factor that may be contributing to the conflicting results is the effect of the social desirability response set on the family's report of their marital adjustment and the adjustment of their children. Social desirability has been found to be positively correlated with a number of culturally valued traits such as dominance, responsibility, and cooperativeness; and negatively correlated with a

broad variety of undesirable characteristics including anxiety, neuroticism, and hostility (cf. Edwards, 1970). It is quite possible that an individual's report of marital dissatisfaction or behavior problems exhibited by their child is also influenced by a tendency to respond in a socially accepted direction.

The purpose of the present investigation is to examine the inter-relationships among several measures of family adjustment and, more specifically, to explore the role of the social desirability response set on the self-report of marital and child adjustment. It is hoped that the information will prove useful in both the interpretation of the existing literature and the planning of future investigations of marital adjustment and the emotional adjustment of children.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 69 couples with at least one child between the ages of 2.0 and 13.0 years recruited through advertisement (43.5%) and letters sent to synagogues, churches (55.5%), and other community organizations (.9%). Eight dollars was either paid to the couple (44.4%) or donated to their church (55.5%) for participation.

The average ages were 34 years for wives (n = 69) and 36 years for husbands (n = 69) with a range of 17 to 57 years. Families were primarily Caucasian (95%), had a mean of 2.6 children (range = 1 to 9 children), and had been married an average 11.5 years (range = 2-22 years). All but 3 couples were legally married to their current partner and 89% were married for the first time. Forty-three percent of the subjects earned less than $10,000, 21.9% earned $10,000-$19,999, 14.0% earned &20,000-

$29,999, and 19.3% earned $30,000 or more, per year. Almost all participants had graduated from high school (96%), 74% had a college degree, and 31% had an advanced degree. Occupations were as follows; 37.6% professional (eg. social worker, teacher), 20.0% owner or manager, 2.4% clerical. 2.4% sales, 4.8% skilled worker, .8% service worker, 18.4% full-time homemaker, 4.8% full-time student, and 8.8% other.

The target children were 35 boys and 34 girls with a mean age of 6.6 years.

Measures

The Spouse Observation Checklist (SOC; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974) contains 409 empirically selected pleasing and displeasing behaviors performed by the spouse in 12 content categories: companionship, affection, consideration, sex, communication, coupling activities, child care and parenting, household responsibilities, financial decision making, employment-education, personal habits and appearance, and independence. Sample items from the consideration category include "Spouse packed a lunch for me," from the pleasing and, "Spouse was late when I needed the car" from the displeasing behaviors. Scores range from 0 to 259 pleasing events and 0 to 150 displeasing events per day. Spouses indicated how frequently each of the SOC behaviors occured during the 24 period prior to testing. The percent of couples completing the SOC on each weekday from Sunday to Saturday was 16%, 15%, 20%, 15%, 6%, 14%, 14%, respectively.

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) is a 32 item measure of marital adjustment. Respondents are asked to rate the frequency of marital agreement on a 6-point Likert scale (always agree to never agree) in 15 areas of marital interaction such as handling family finances and sexual relations and to indicate how frequently (all the time to never) events such as a quarrel or a discussion of divorce occur. An overall

representation of the degree of happiness in the relationship is also included and total scores range from 0 to 151.

The Louisville Behavior Checklist (LBC; Miller, 1977) was designed to assess child psychopathology and includes 164 statements (e.g. "Lacks self-confidence", "Has threatened or attempted suicide", "Bossy with friends") to which the parent responds by indicating whether the item is a true or false description of their child. The LBC yields a total Severity Level and 3 second order factor scores; Aggression, Inhibition, and Learning or Cognitive Disability. Separate forms of the test are used for children 4 to 6 years and those 7 to 13 years with 145 overlapping items.

The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI; Robinson, Eyberg, & Ross, 1980) is a 36 item assessment of conduct problem behaviors. The parent indicates how frequently each behavior occurs on a 7-point Likert scale (always to never) and whether or not it is a problem for them (yes or no). The ECBI includes items such as "Physically fights with friends", "Dawdles dressing", "Hits parents"; and yields an intensity score (range = 36 to 252) and a problem score (range = 0-36).

The Parental Attitude Research Instrument (PARI; Schafer & Bell, 1958) was designed to measure parental attitudes of warmth and authoritarianism. Parents indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree (4 point Likert Scale) with 45 statements such as, "If a parent is wrong he should admit it to his child" or "Parents very often feel that they can't stand their children a moment longer". Scores range from 10 to 40 on warmth and 30 to 120 on authoritarianism.

Edwards' Social Desirability Scale (ESDS; Edwards, 1953) is a 39 item questionnaire designed to assess an individual's tendency to endorse

as self-descriptive characteristics that are socially valued. Responses scored in socially desirable directions include, "People often disappoint me (F)", "Criticism or scolding hurts me terribly (F)", and "I am liked by most people who know me (T)". The potential scoring range is from 0 to 39.

Procedure

Couples responding to the publicity were mailed a consent form, a cover letter, the ECBI, the SOC, and a demographic data sheet (Linehan, 1979) to complete at home. The LBC, DAS, ESDS, and PARI were administered at the university or the couple's church in small groups by undergraduate research assistants. Questionnaires were answered in a randomly determined order, and couples were instructed not to discuss their responses with their partner. If the family had more than one child, a target child was selected by the experimenter.

Results

The mean scores listed in Table 1 indicate that these families

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Insert Table 1 about here

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report marital adjustment scores on the DAS that are within two points of published means for married couples (Spanier, 1976), and Social Desirability Scores that are very similar to means obtained by college students (Edwards, 1970). As parents, they report an average number of ECBI conduct problems (Robinson, Eyberg, & Ross, 1980) and an LBC Severity Level that is within normal limits. Thus, the families in this study appear to be similar to other normal families described in the literature. The intercorrelation matrix reported in Table 2 shows that the measures of child

Insert Table 2 about here

deviance are positively correlated with one another. ECBI Problem Scores are significantly correlated with LBC factor scores of Aggression, $r = .27(69)$, $p < .05$, and Learning or Cognitive Disability, $r = .22(69)$, $p < .05$. The data suggest that there is some overlap between the two measures of child deviance and provide support for their validity.

Child rearing attitudes as measured by the PARI were not strongly associated with report of child deviance, nor were they signficantly correlated with social desirability. None of the LBC factor scores or the overall Severity Level were significantly correlated with either Warmth or Authoritarianism, and among the ECBI scores, only the total number of problems reported was associated with Warmth, $r = -.25(69)$, $p < .01$. Correlations may have been depressed by the relatively small PARI variance but, given the lack of consistent trends, it is also possible that PARI child rearing attitudes are not associated with child deviance as measured by the ECBI and the LBC in this sample.

The two measures of marital interaction are associated with one another. The global report of marital agreement and general satisfaction on the DAS is significantly and positively correlated with the number of daily pleasing marital behaviors reported on the Spouse Observation Checklist (see Table 2). The negative relationship between marital adjustment and displeasing daily marital events approaches, but does not reach, significance (see Table 2). When the ratio of displeasing to total marital events (pleases and displeases) is calculated and subjected to an arc sin

transformation, the correlation between the resulting displeasing event ratio and marital adjustment is $r = -.38(69)$, $p < .001$. Thus, it appears that reporting frequent pleasing and a low ratio of displeasing events is associated with a global report of marital adjustment.

The significant negative correlation between the LBC Severity Level and the DAS (see Table 2) suggests that couples high in marital adjustment tend to have children who evidence little psychopathology. However, this finding is not replicated by the correlations obtained when other measures of marital and child adjustment are employed. In fact, the largest non-significant coefficient indicates that couples with high rates of pleasing marital events tend to report more, rather than less, intense conduct problems on the ECBI.

The LBC and DAS, are significantly correlated with social desirability (see Table 2), as are the LBC factor scores of Aggression $r = -.58(69)$, $p < .001$, Inhibition $r = -.63(69)$, $p < .001$, and Learning or Cognitive Disabilities $r = -.38(69)$, $p < .001$. The ECBI and SOC are not significantly correlated with social desirability, not do they evidence a relationship between marital and child adjustment.

When social desirability is controlled using partial correlation (see Table 3) the relationship between marital and child adjustment

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Insert Table 3 about here

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disappears. The DAS and LBC correlation becomes negligible as do the correlations between marital adjustment scores and the factor scores of Aggression $r = .03(69)$, n.s., Inhibition $r = -.09(69)$, n.s., and Learning or Cognitive Disabilities $r = .06(69)$, n.s. The correlations between the LBC and the ECBI are unaffected by social desirability as are the

correlations between the SOC and the DAS. The correlation between the displeasing event ratio and the DAS score also remains stable when social desirability is controlled, $r = -.39(69)$, $p < .001$. Thus, social desirability does not appear to influence the correlations between two measures of child deviance nor does it affect the relationship between two measures of marital interaction but, it does impact the correlaction between measures of marital and child adjustment.

Discussion

The social desirability response set appears to play an important role in the relationship between marital and child adjustment among normal families. The uncontrolled marital-child adjustment correlation obtained in this study closely replicates the findings of earlier investigations using similar self-report measures and methods of data analysis (Ferguson & Allen, 1978). Yet, this relationship disappears when social desirability is controlled. These results suggest that previously reported correlations between marital and child adjustment may have been inflated by a social desirability response set.

Individuals in this study who score high on social desirability may actually have happier marriages and better adjusted children than do those who are low on the scale. If this is an accurate interpretation of the findings, one would expect all measures of marital and child adjustment to be significantly correlated with social desirability, yet all measures are not associated with social desirability. A more likely interpretation is that when people are asked to describe their families they differ along a dimension of willingness to endorse problems so that those who admit to disagreement and conflict in their marriage are also

those who are willing to attribute undesirable traits and characteristics to their children. The fact that some measures demonstrate a relationship with social desirability and some do not, may reflect differences among measures in content and subjectivity.

The instruments that focus on observable behavior, minimize the role of opinion, and call for the fewest judgments about the characteristics of others seem least susceptible to the influence of the social desirability response set. For example, the LBC which asks if the child is ambitious or acts immature is more strongly influenced by social desirability than is the ECBI which asks parents to indicate how frequently behaviors such as physical fighting with friends, dawdling at meals, or crying occurs. Among the marital measures, subjective rating of spouse agreement on the DAS is more strongly associated with the social desirability than is reporting of specific marital behavior on the SOC.

Measures with little relationship to the social desirability response set also contain items that refer to behavior occuring frequently in most families, whereas those instruments highly correlated with social desirability include at least some items that refer to relatively rare marital (e.g., "How often do you leave the house after a fight?" DAS) or child (e.g., "Cruel with animals or people in a shocking way (sadistic)" LBC) behaviors. Thus, an instrument's sensitivity to the social desirability response set may be exacerbated by the inclusion of items that reflect serious pathology.

This study highlights the importance of social desirability in the self-report of marital and child adjustment among well-adjusted, middle class, educated families but, it is possible that social desirability

may also play a role in self-report by disturbed families. A close examination of the Johnson and Lobitz data reveals that fathers' marital adjustment scores were significantly and positively correlated with their scores on the K scale of the MMPI, which contains the Edward's Social Desirability Scale as a subset of items. Thus, families seeking treatment, as well as research volunteers may differ along a dimension of willingness to endorse items that place them in an unfavorable light.

These data suggest that caution should be exercised when conclusions about family interaction are drawn from correlational data based on self-report measures. While there is considerable evidence in support of an association between marital disruption and juvenile delinquency (Rutter, 1971), there is little data to support a general association of marital conflict with other childhood disturbances that is not potentially confounded with social desirability. Therefore, it is premature to accept uncritically the assumption that a simple causal relationship exists between marital adjustment and the emotional well being of the child. It is far more likely that the relationship is a complex one, potentially mediated by the type and severity of the marital disturbance and the form of childhood pathology studied. Results of future investigations will be more easily interpretable than the current literature if measures with little or no relationship to social desirability are used in conjunction with other methods of measurement.

It is particularly important that we continue to investigate the role that marital interactions play in the development of healthy, well-adjusted children because our conclusions have serious implications for the selection of both the treatment target and method of clinical inter-

vention. If we are to refine our understanding of family dynamics and child adjustment, it will be necessary to extend our research beyond the limits of self-report to include an examination of individual and situational variables that influence both marital and parental success.

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Table 1

Average Scores

	Husbands		Wives	
	M	SD	M	SD
Spouse Observation Checklist				
Pleases	61.0	25.5	57.9	23.9
Displeases	5.2	7.5	6.5	6.0
Dyadic Adjustment Scale	113.0	12.6	113.0	14.8
Louisville Behavior Checklist				
Agression	6.5	7.1	5.6	6.2
Inhibition	7.2	8.4	6.2	7.4
Learning or Cognitive Disability	6.5	6.9	5.9	4.7
Severity Level	9.7	8.0	7.9	6.6
Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory				
Intensity	100.9	24.6	96.4	21.8
Problem	5.5	5.4	5.7	5.2
Parental Attitude Research Instrument				
Warmth	23.4	4.5	22.2	4.5
Authoritarianism	62.0	10.6	58.0	10.1
Edward's Social Desirability Scale	33.1	5.1	33.3	5.1

Table 2

Family Adjustment and Social Desirability

	Child Adjustment		Marital Adjustment			
	LBC Severity Level	ECBI Intensity Score	ECBI Problem Score	SOC Total Pleases	SOC Total Displeases	DAS	Edward's Social Desirability Scale
Child adjustment		r	r	r	r	r	r
LBC severity level		.29***	.32***	-.11	-.12	-.19*	-.30***
ECBI intensity score			.51***	.18	-.05	.08	.10
ECBI problem score				-.02	.00	-.08	-.07
Marital adjustment							
SOC total pleases					.31**	.30**	.09
SOC total displeases						-.16	-.16
DAS							.39***

Note. LBC = Louisville Behavior Checklist; ECBI = Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory; SOC = Spouse Observation Checklist; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; n = 69.

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < 01$; *** = $p < .001$.

Table 3

Partial Correlation Coefficients
Controlling for Social Desirability

	Child Adjustment			Marital Adjustment		
	LBC Severity Level	ECBI Intensity Score	ECBI Problem Score	SOC Total Pleases	SOC Total Displeases	DAS
Child Adjustment						
LBC severity level		.34**	.32**	-.09	-.18	-.08
ECBI intensity score			.52***	.17	.04	.04
ECBI problem score				-.15	-.01	-.05
Marital Adjustment						
SOC total pleases					.33**	.29**
SOC total displeases						-.11
DAS						

Note. LBC = Louisville Behavior Checklist; ECBI = Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory; SOC = Spouse Observation Checklist; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; n = 69.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

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